DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 115 RC 020 771

AUTHOR	Caplan, Judith G.
TITLE	Parent Involvement 101: A Guide for Rural Educators. Rural School Development Outreach Project.
INSTITUTION	North Central Regional Educational Lab., Oak Brook, IL.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	95
CONTRACT	RP91002007
NOTE	38p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Strategies; Elementary Secondary Education; *Parent Participation; *Parent School Relationship; Profiles; Program Development; Rural Areas; *Rural Schools; *School Community Relationship

ABSTRACT

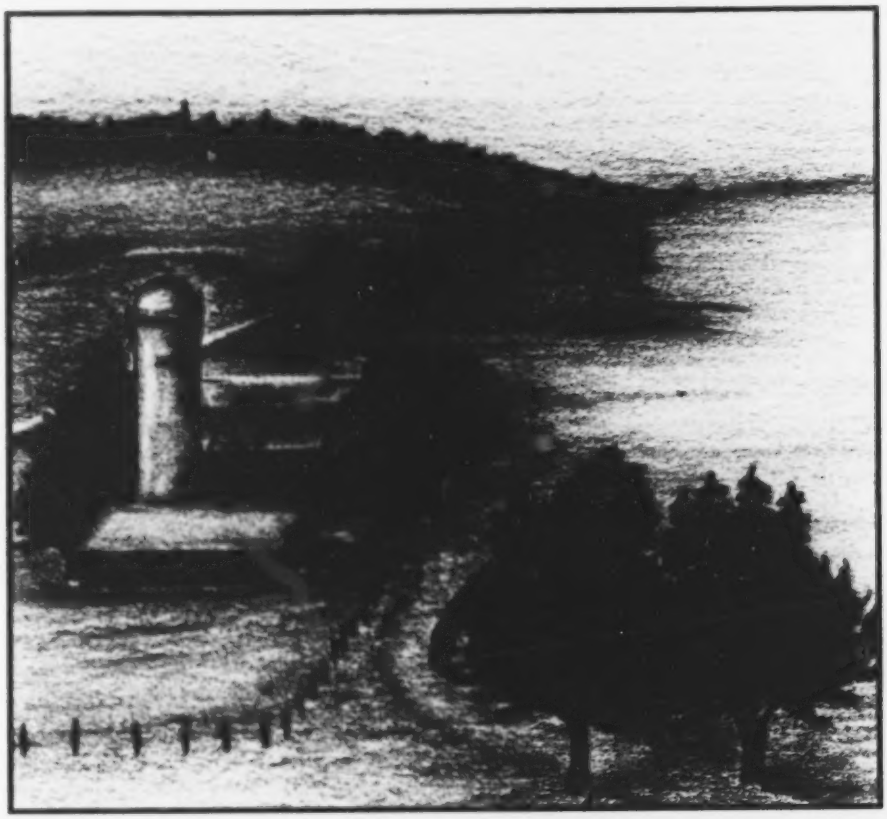
High levels of parent involvement in their children's education result in higher student achievement; higher attendance levels; a decline in dropout rates; fewer disciplinary problems; and better student motivation, self-esteem, and behavior. Since unacknowledged parents withdraw from the school, schools should acknowledge parent participation. To that end, forms of parent involvement are identified: fulfilling basic parental responsibilities, working with their children, participating in school events, being a learner, volunteering time, being an advocate, and serving on an advisory committee or board. For each form of involvement, questions are posed to help understand why parents might not be active in the area, and strategies to promote parent involvement in the area are presented. Elements common to strong parent involvement programs are formally adopted policies, administrative support, diverse opportunities for involvement, training, a partnership approach, effective communication, acknowledgement of families' culture by the school, evaluation, a school culture that welcomes parents, and a parent involvement coordinator. Special considerations for rural contexts are that schools in rural communities are already integrated into community functions; administrators and staff know the local families and understand their concerns; the small size of rural schools allows for more personal attention, yet also results in overworked staff and a high staff turnover rate; and transportation and scarcity of resources are often a problem. Site profiles of five notable parent involvement programs include location, forms of parent involvement, community and program descriptions, program elements, special rural issues, contact persons, and replication concerns. Contains 35 references in endnotes. (TD)

ED 402 115

RC

Parent Involvement 101: A Guide for Rural Educators

Rural School Development Outreach Project



by Judith G. Caplan

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

NCREL

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

RC 020771

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory
1900 Spring Road, Suite 300
Oak Brook, Illinois 60521-1480
(708) 571-4700, Fax (708) 571-4716

Jeri Nowakowski, Executive Director

Joseph J. D'Amico, Director of Rural Education

Judith G. Caplan, Director of Early Childhood Education

Janet Hintz, Desktop Publisher

The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL), one of ten federally supported regional educational laboratories in the country, works with education professionals and policymakers in a seven-state region: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. NCREL's mission is to support school restructuring to promote learning for all students—especially those most at risk of academic failure in rural and urban schools.

© 1995 North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

This publication is based on work sponsored wholly or in part by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education, under contract number RP91002007. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of OERI, the Department of Education, or any other agency of the U.S. government.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Acknowledgements

Many individuals played an important role in the development of **Parent Involvement 101: A guide for rural educators**. First, without the capable leadership and direction of **Joseph J. D'Amico**, Director of Rural Education at North Central Educational Laboratory (NCREL), this guide would not have been possible. I am grateful to the following persons who contributed their expertise and hard work towards the publication of this document:

Mary Anderson, Program Specialist, Rural Education and Professional Development (NCREL)
Linda Devitt, Principal, Johnson School, Spencer, Iowa
Linda Friedrich, Research Consultant
Janet Hintz, Program Secretary and Desktop Publisher
Dr. Linda G. Kunesh, Principal, Medinah Primary School, Medinah, Illinois
Shawnda Paulk, Project Assistant, Early Childhood and Family Education (NCREL)
Mary Rowitz, Editor (NCREL)
Lenaya Raack, Editor (NCREL)
Site Profile Contact Persons:
Kay Weigel, Barbara Tierney - Ogden Elementary School
Linda Shoette, Family Math
JoAnne Christensen, MegaSkills
Ellie Macfarlane, Daria Staley - Parents Sharing Books
Lois Engstrom, Pam Lindberg - Minnesota Early Childhood Education

I encourage the reader to work on the issue of parent involvement "one-parent-at-a-time." The issues confronting education are great. Solutions will take our best thinking and hard work. We need all the partners we can get.

Judith G. Caplan
Director
Early Childhood and Family Education
North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

Contents

Why the Emphasis on Parent Involvement? 1

The Impact of Parent Involvement on School Achievement 2

Other Benefits 3

Barriers to Parent Involvement 4

Forms of Parent Involvement 6

- Checklist 8

Elements Common to Strong Parent Involvement Programs 13

Conclusion 17

Special Rural Considerations 17

Introduction to Site Profiles 19

- Manhattan/Ogden Even Start Program Profile 21
- Family Math 23
- Megaskills, The Home and School Institute 25
- Parents Sharing Books 29
- Minnesota Early Childhood Education 31

Endnotes 35

Parent Involvement 101:
A guide for rural educators

Why the Emphasis on Parent Involvement?

The role of the school has changed. As a result of changes in demographics, family structures, and national policies, the school is moving from an institution responsible for developing the cognitive skills of children to an organization asked to support the family in child rearing.[1] An increase in the number of single parents and the number of mothers of school-age children who work outside the home has manifested itself in increased attention to the quality of schooling and after-school services. A general rise in the level of education by all Americans (the number of Americans receiving bachelor's degrees has more than doubled in the last 30 years[2]) has created a schooled parent body on a level equal to the college educated teacher. This well educated parent is more likely to question teaching practice, and actively seek explanations.

Beginning in the 1960s, federally funded programs—Head Start, Chapter 1, Special Education initiatives—have called for a strong parent involvement component. Many parents with activist experiences in preschool programs arrive at the elementary school expecting to be included and listened to.[3] Not only do parents expect and want more from their schools, they need more.

Given increasing divorce rates, the growing number of single-parent families and families in which both parents work, and the general complexity of modern life, even children of well educated, middle-class parents can come to school unprepared because of the stress their families are undergoing.[4]

The school is now seen not as a substitute for the family, but as a partner to the family. Both are charged with bringing children into adulthood. As a community institution, the school should assume responsibility for initiating this partnership.[5]

Many practitioners and school advocates look to "parent involvement"[6] as one way to strengthen schools and promote academic achievement. The eighth goal of the Goals 2000 legislation asks that "**every school . . . promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.**"[7] The term "parent involvement" has become a popular rallying cry for many but often the term conveys different things to different people. It is

important that clarity and common agreement on definition be achieved. Some school people use the term parent involvement and mean increasing parent attendance at meetings, activities, and school functions. For others, parent involvement refers to parents personally interacting with their children about school work and educational issues. Still others see the term as meaning parent participation in decision making on issues related to curriculum, staffing, and budget. For yet another group, parent involvement represents the wish that parents change certain aspects of their parenting or become "better parents." This can range from wanting parents to assure that children arrive to school clean, well clothed, and on time to raising children who dutifully learn each lesson presented in class.

In addition to the spectrum of school definitions of parent involvement, parents themselves express a range of concepts which they feel fall under the heading "parent involvement." In this list are requests for the school to provide classes on effective discipline, strategies for dealing with peer pressure, and guidance on issues of violence, racism, and substance abuse. Assistance in securing health and social services — especially if these have been requested or required by the school — is part of how parents want schools to be involved with them. Other ways include providing recreational and enrichment opportunities. Often the living conditions of families are so severe that parents have little time or energy to devote to school or agency concerns. Parents want school officials to understand that it is the crisis nature of their lives that prevents them from becoming involved. Any form of parent involvement becomes more difficult when the parent's personal experience with school has been negative.

The Impact of Parent Involvement on School Achievement

A large body of evidence supports the claim that when parents are involved, student achievement is raised.[8] More than 15 years of examination of parent involvement programs across the nation indicate that when parents take an active part in their children's education, higher levels of academic achievement are realized. This result is true for all economic, racial, and cultural groups.[9] Janet Chrispeels, who has done extensive research on parent involvement, reports that when parents are involved in learning activities with their children they have a greater understanding of what their child is being taught and are more likely to feel they should help their child at home.[10]

This correlation between levels of parent involvement and achievement is not strictly causal; involved parents do not "produce" successful students. Rather, students are enabled to produce their own success when the institutions of family and school work together to motivate, socialize, and educate children.[11]

Good relationships between home and school can serve to motivate students to achieve at the level of their ability in school.[12]

Other Benefits of Parent Involvement

Aside from increased achievement levels, schools with high levels of parent involvement report the following benefits:

higher attendance levels
decline in dropout rates
fewer disciplinary problems
better student motivation, self-esteem, and behavior[13]

Epstein reports that when teachers committed to increasing parent involvement, the parents ". . . felt that they should help their children at home; . . . understood more about what their child was being taught in school; . . . were more positive about the teacher's interpersonal skills, and rated the teacher higher in overall teaching ability. . . . "[14] Parents evaluate as better those teachers who work to achieve parent involvement. Communities which have invested in encouraging parents to become involved in the school and learning process have seen an increased level of parent and community support for the school system.[15] In times of dwindling revenues and citizenry revolt about tax increases, schools are highly aware of the need to maintain good public relations with community members. Actively involved parents can be vocal advocates for schools at referendum time.

Barriers to Parent Involvement

While the evidence is compelling that parent involvement has significant benefits, there often is resistance by both school personnel and families to actively pursue a parent involvement strategy. Teachers often see working on parent involvement as an addition to their already long list of responsibilities. Too often districts or state departments of education mandate teachers to work with parent or advisory groups, but fail to provide the needed time or training for developing leadership skills, communication proficiencies, and facilitation competencies. Very little training in parent involvement is included in teacher education at the undergraduate level.[16]

Teachers often talk about parent involvement from a *deficit* perspective as illustrated by the comment, "Those who most need to be involved are not." The focus is on what parents lack and how educators can best teach parents to support learning at home.[17] Teachers often have low expectations of parents, especially those from poor and minority communities.[18] As a result, these teachers fail to provide opportunities for parents to become involved.

Research indicates that most parents have an interest in their children's education and are willing to be more involved in their schooling.[19] When schools make parent involvement a priority and reach out to all parents, then economic and educational levels do not define which parents will participate.[20]

Another barrier may be the principal who does not provide the requisite leadership and support in pushing for meaningful parent involvement.[21] The principal may remember times when parents contacted the school to complain that something is wrong with their child's education or sought special treatment—requests for a particular teacher, waivers from requirements, leniency in disciplinary actions—for their children. This principal may discourage active parents out of a fear that they will expect preferential handling of their concerns.

School districts and schools boards are wary that involved parents will influence the choice of curriculum or textbooks. Both teachers and principals may be cautious out of fear that parents will challenge their professional autonomy and judgment.

Even when school systems acknowledge that parent involvement is valuable, rarely is it made a priority.[22] Other tasks and initiatives fill up the day. The school culture may marginalize the role of parents and create an environment that says "stay away." Inconvenient hours, inaccessible personnel, communiques in a "foreign" language (educational jargon), and unwelcoming visiting procedures all can be barriers. Sometimes, forging a relationship with the school requires a most resourceful parent.

Parents, too, install barriers which hinder active partnership with the school. It is not unusual to attribute any school difficulties a child may have to some deficiency on the part of the parent. Over the past decade there has been a concerted effort to acknowledge the important role parents play as their children's first teachers. Because the early influence of parents is so great, some people assume that if a child comes to school unprepared, "poor teaching" at home is the culprit. Sensitive to this real or imagined prejudgment, parents may approach the school in a defensive posture.

At-risk children often come from homes with different values, expectations, and environments than the schools'. When the school world and home world are dissimilar:

> *Children cannot be expected to bridge the gaps and overcome the confusion of who to learn from. The predictable consequence in such situations is that children usually embrace the familiar home culture and reject the unfamiliar school culture, including its academic components and goals.*[23]

Often the child feels caught in the middle of the school and home, and the parent sees the school as an adversary.

Some parents' personal experiences at school were so negative that they now are fearful or suspicious of school officials.[24] Parent or teacher perceptions that the other is uncaring can only extend the distance between them. Other parents may be unaware of their role in their child's education or may be consumed trying to meet their family's basic needs. They are unlikely to heed requests to become more actively involved unless these requests are coupled with needed information and resources. Finally, there are those parents afflicted with physical, emotional, or social illness. This small percentage of parents probably are unable to work cooperatively with the school regardless of the level of assistance. For the children in these families, society must take up the slack.[25] Studies indicate that once one-third of a school's parent body is reasonably active, all children start doing better.[26]

As students mature and seek greater independence from their parents, they may discourage their parents from coming to school. This "developmentally appropriate" student action, coupled with a larger and more compartmentalized middle and secondary school setting, makes it no surprise that levels of parent involvement are extremely low in high schools.[27]

Forms of Parent Involvement

Given current demands and reported levels of stress on families, schools wishing to promote involvement by parents must first acknowledge current levels of participation. Often, we find, this is not done. Because parent involvement may take many forms, schools seeking a particular type of support may overlook parent efforts in other areas. Our experience suggests that the result is often unacknowledged parents who withdraw from the school. We suggest that administrators may wish to assess where their students' families currently exhibit involvement. Strategies for increasing involvement in other areas can then be developed. Many researchers (Epstein, Jones, Berger, Chrispeels, etc.) have developed categories of parent involvement. Effective programs will offer comprehensive opportunities for parents to become involved in all aspects of school activity. Conscious efforts must be made to be *inclusive* of the total parent population. Based on research and expert opinion, and drawing heavily on the work of Joyce Epstein, we have compiled this listing of the many forms parent involvement can take.

Fulfilling basic parental responsibilities for a child's education and social development at home. Making sure children arrive at school well rested, appropriately clothed, and well fed are some of the duties included in this role. We think this is a fundamental responsibility of all parents.

Working with their children. Providing home-based learning activities, valuing education, monitoring homework, tutoring, etc., are examples of how families actively participate in the child's learning. We believe that when the home environment supports learning, both parent and child benefit.

Participating in and supporting school events. Included here is attendance at meetings and conferences and serving as an audience for school programs and sporting events. Although we recognize this may be difficult, we feel that parents should try as best as they can to support their children's education by participating in school events. We also feel schools should make this participation as easy as possible for working, single, and weary parents.

- **Being a learner.** Many parents will participate in adult educational offerings provided by the school in order to improve their parenting skills or to develop skills in literacy, math, computer literacy, or English as a second language.

- **Volunteering time, being a classroom aide, or providing other assistance at the school.** Some parents are available to serve as classroom aides, help with material preparation, or provide one-on-one assistance to students. Others can gather resources for classroom projects and/or fundraising for special programs or equipment. We realize that every parent cannot volunteer every time but we think it is important for every parent to contribute this way at least once a school year. And schools should make efforts to enable all parents to contribute.

- **Being an advocate** for the school and its programs in the community. Parents can demonstrate their involvement by vocally supporting efforts to increase school funding, encouraging local businesses to contribute to school programs, or serving as a spokesperson for school issues at community forums. We feel that supporting the school is an important parent obligation. Parents have powerful stories to tell of how the school has made a difference in the lives of their children.

- **Serving as an advisor or decisionmaker on an advisory committee or board** with responsibility for advising school leaders or helping in school governance. While few parents will have an opportunity to participate in this way, we feel that this is a key role for parents. It should not be defined either as a monitoring or a rubber stamp position. The former will create school defensiveness and the latter will result in parent frustration. Partnership is strengthened when parents and school personnel are joint decisionmakers and problem solvers.[28] This shared responsibility builds on the partnership model and leads to a greater sense of ownership and empowerment by all.[29] We feel that it is important for schools to provide parents with the leadership training needed for full participation as a partner in policy development.

Forms of Parent Involvement - Checklist

We have developed this checklist for schools looking for ways to increase parent involvement. Once you've decided on the form of parent involvement you would like to increase among your parent body, use the checklist as a guide for action. The **Questions to Consider** section offers a few queries to help you understand why parents might not be as active in an area as you might want. Following the questions are a listing of strategies to consider to promote parent involvement in this area. In the **Notes** section, the checklist provides room for your comments, local resources, or a record of your attempts.

Fulfilling Basic Parent Responsibilities

Questions to consider: What stresses does the family face? If the parents are having difficulties meeting basic obligations, what resources—agencies or individuals—are available to assist the family? Who is helping this family? Who is available to help?

If parents do not participate in this way, consider:

- ☐ Doing a home visit
- ☐ Investigating what family situations prevent this type of involvement
- ☐ Referring them to a social services agency
- ☐ Contacting the family and offering assistance
  (Should be done by the person at school who knows the family best)

Working with Their Children

Questions to consider: Do parents have the requisite skill level to assist their child with learning activities?

If parents do not participate in this way, consider:

- ☐ Referring them to a family literacy program
- ☐ Providing materials for the child to keep at home—extra set of books, paper, school supplies, reference materials
- ☐ Establishing homework help sessions at school, an after-school center, or the library
- ☐ Offering Family Nights where parents gain knowledge about new teaching methods, etc.
- ☐ Establishing a homework hotline (telephone system where families can hear that evening's homework assignment and leave message for teacher about difficulties their child might have)
- ☐ Discussing with parents about setting up a quiet, designated place for study in the home
- ☐ Creating a newsletter of family enrichment activities
- ☐ Developing take-home packets which include materials and suggested activities for parents and children to do together
- ☐ Preparing homework assignments that relate to the experiences of the child and his/her family
- ☐ Organizing family field trips to museums, nature centers, etc.

Participate in / Support School Events

Questions to consider: Is timely notification of events provided? Are communications in a form easily understood by all parents?

If parents do not participate in this way, consider:

- ☐ Holding events at times when parents can easily attend
- ☐ Linking an important meeting with a presentation by students
- ☐ Offering incentives to classes with a high level of parent attendance
- ☐ Providing transportation, food, and child care for meetings and conferences

Being a Learner

Question to consider: What would be gained by providing educational programs for adults?

If parents do not participate in this way, consider:

- ☐ Surveying parents to discover their educational needs and wants
- ☐ Linking educational offerings with job preparation

Volunteering to Assist at School

Questions to consider: Are the tasks parents are asked to perform meaningful? How does our school express appreciation for volunteer efforts?

If parents do not participate in this way, consider:

- ☐ Explaining how volunteers' efforts assist the students and/or teachers
- ☐ Asking personally for assistance with a specific task
- ☐ Defining tasks in terms of time commitment
- ☐ Appointing parent chairpersons for committees and asking them to select assistants
- ☐ Providing office space—desk, phone, supplies—to parent volunteers
- ☐ Offering volunteer activities that can be done at home or during evening hours

Being an Advocate

Questions to consider: How are parents informed of important school issues? What kind of advocacy assistance does your school want or need? Are the school and its operation worth advocating for from the parents' point of view?

If parents do not participate in this way, consider:

- ☐ Allowing those who are the fund-raisers to determine how funds will be spent
- ☐ Creating a file of sample letters and telephone scripts
- ☐ Providing a practice session for school spokespersons
- ☐ Reimbursing expenses incurred while being an advocate for the school
- ☐ Developing a guide to school board meetings for parents

Being a Decisionmaker

Questions to consider: In which areas is parent decision making beneficial, mandated, or desired?

If parents do not participate in this way, consider:

- ☐ Providing leadership development activities for parents
- ☐ Having the parent members of decision-making groups meet as a group before the general meeting to develop a parent's agenda
- ☐ Prohibiting the use of educational jargon at meetings
- ☐ Selecting a parent to chair or cochair the meeting

NOTES, IDEAS, and COMMENTS

Elements Common to Strong Parent Involvement Programs

Successful parent involvement programs share certain characteristics. As we review the research and survey the field, we see that schools that devote themselves to increasing the level of parent involvement have certain structural elements in place. David Williams and N. Chavkin[30] identified a number of characteristics common to strong parent involvement programs. Other researchers[31] have contributed others. We offer the following list of ten. None is more important than any other. Rather active parent involvement programs require school and staff to work on each of the elements.

Formally adopted policies: Having a formally adopted policy stating the school's willingness and wish to work in partnership with parents is very important. In some schools these policies are posted in the office or published in a newsletter. Such policies legitimize the importance of parent involvement and provide leverage for administrators. Development of such policies will lead to clarity about the forms of parent involvement needed by the school. Such policies can be developed by the faculty, school board, a school improvement team, or the principals within a district.

Administrative support: While individual teachers can do much to foster parent participation, their efforts will mean more if they are backed by a committed administration. Principals and superintendents should support parent involvement with their words and deeds. This can take the form of allocating resources—money, materials, people—to the task of involving parents. It also can take the form of leadership and advocacy—either real or symbolic. [32]

Diverse opportunities for parent involvement: Provide a variety of ways parents can participate. Create job descriptions for volunteer positions, define helping tasks which can be done at home, and offer both long-term and one-time opportunities. Develop a varied menu of involvement opportunities. If the list is broad enough, most parents will find some way they are willing to participate.

Training: Training is offered to staff and to parents—separately and together. Topics for staff might include communication skills, using volunteers in the classroom, and home visiting. Parents might be interested in workshops about school-related issues—i.e., helping with homework, dealing with

school anxiety —as well as parenting issues—discipline, drug and alcohol abuse, etc. Programs that provide parents with basic skills—literacy, job search skills—or meet their need for personal development and recreation can result in appreciative parents eager to "do something" for the school. Schools may choose to share information about school happenings, volunteer opportunities at the school, and summaries of training events with local media. A weekly radio feature or newspaper article about the school might be more developed.

Some topics for shared training by school personnel and parents might be planning effective parent-teacher conferences, increasing student motivation, or preparing for the next grade level.

A partnership approach: This approach is based on the notion that schools and families share a common need to foster positive growth in children. Each partner brings expertise and strengths to the partnership. These partnerships influence—or maybe they are created in—many arenas: joint training, support in each other's respective roles; classroom and school improvement activities; decision making; advocacy. An effective partnership solicits rather than requires parent commitment, values the teaching role of parents, and encourages parents to share their ideas on teaching methods.[33] The partnership approach is a mind-set or attitude. Schools need to examine the values staff hold which support or negate willingness to partner with parents.

Effective communication: Effective parent involvement programs work hard to establish two-way communication between home and school. Contact should be ongoing, designed to share good as well as bad news, two-way, and structured in various formats. Written notices are part of a communication package which includes newsletters, assignment calendars, information packets, local access cable programs, conferences, phone calls, and home visits. Parent surveys, response forms to progress reports, and informal coffees provide parents with opportunities to share information, as well as to hear about their child.[34] Parent conferences, home visits, and community forums are designed to learn about parent concerns and mutually decide on courses of action. Informal exchanges

at student productions and joint parent/staff endeavors foster an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. Recent advances in technology promise to expand communication options. All methods of communication need to be easily understood, jargon-free, and in a language spoken by the family at home.

The families' culture should be acknowledged by the school: Attitudes towards school, learning, and authority figures are influenced by culture. When families feel that the cultural values of their homes are not respected, they often respond by withdrawing support from the school. Staff need to become familiar with the home culture of their students and work with families to devise ways by which the school can support the home culture of its students. When possible, all written materials should be available in the home language of the child.

Evaluation: Regular and ongoing assessment of parent involvement efforts allows schools and families to see which efforts are most productive. Questionnaires, telephone interviews, meetings, and discussions can assess current efforts. Evaluation results should drive program modification.

A school culture which welcomes parents: An attitude of inclusion, respect, and value for all families is expressed. Parents are always welcomed in the school and classroom. Teachers share child successes as well as difficulties, encourage parents to drop in classrooms or call with questions, and are genuinely interested in their students' families. Parent-friendly hours and services such as transportation and child care enable parents to participate. Parents can easily assess if school staff genuinely welcome and seek their input.

A parent involvement coordinator: The task of establishing and overseeing an effective parent involvement program is too large to be an add-on to anyone's staff's assignment. The strongest programs rely on a coordinator who networks with parents, plans programs, assists teachers, and develops materials.[35]

Conclusion

Establishing a parent involvement program in your school is not a quick, easy-to-do task. Serious undertakings such as this take considerable time and effort. Schools should start small, invest in planning, and practice the skills needed to work effectively with families. As schools become better at working with families, more families will be encouraged to participate in the schools. This makes it easier for schools to increase their efforts at partnership with families. Everyone benefits, especially students. Supported both by school and home, students are most able to achieve to their optimal potential.

Special Rural Considerations

Rural schools, like their urban counterparts, are striving to increase the level of active participation of families in the education of children. Certain contextual issues common to rural communities — seasonal concerns, distance from resources, actual and perceived isolation, personal relationships between school staff and community residents, the pivotal role the school plays in a community — provide a backdrop for crafting local parent involvement programs which reflect the needs of rural schools and families. Through NCREL's work with rural schools across our region, we have learned many ways to work within the special contexts of rural schools, we have come to understand the factors which contribute to these contexts, and we are committed to developing strategies that work for rural schools.

There are many benefits that a rural context brings to any initiative designed to boost parent involvement. Rural communities display remarkable resilience in the face of barriers. Their natural tendency to do more for themselves and view problems as challenges are resources to draw on when crafting parent involvement programs reflective of the rural character and spirit.

We know, for example, that in rural communities the local school serves a function beyond childhood education. In many communities, schools are the location of social, recreational, civic, and cultural events. Schools are valued for roles apart from education. Rural schools might take advantage of this high regard to achieve increased participation from parents. The interdependence between school and community can be a plus and should be taken into account when planning for parent involvement.

Likewise, administrators and teaching staff of rural schools are often well known and well liked by the community's residents. As residents of a rural community themselves, they are more likely to hold the same values and concerns as their students' families.

Similarly, rural teachers usually know the families of their students well and understand their concerns. These personal relationships can form the foundation of a strong parent involvement program.

However, there can also be potential difficulties with this heightened familiarity. In some cases, school staff may have developed an unconscious preconception, based on past family history, of what a particular child or family can and cannot do: *"None of the Wainwright children ever did their homework"* or *"The Allens always have let their children run wild. They just don't care."* Prejudicial stereotyping may very well be a barrier to involving those families who may most need a connection with the school.

Recent demographic changes in rural communities have challenged the personal bonds between residents. Lower housing and living costs in rural communities have resulted in an influx of nontraditional, sometimes less affluent families from urban areas. Special efforts will need to be made to reach out to these families, perhaps requiring a new approach and "mind-set" for many rural school personnel.

The ratio of families with school-age children to total rural population is declining. Rural schools are smaller schools. Three-quarters of all rural public elementary and secondary schools have fewer than 400 students. We see this small size as an asset because it allows for more personal attention. Yet small schools often require teachers to teach a higher than average number of different courses and principals to assume multiple responsibilities. The turnover rate is particularly high as staff move on to schools with higher salaries and better benefits. These conditions can constitute barriers to staff time, commitment, and energy. Where they exist, these barriers must be overcome if rural schools are to have strong parent involvement programs.

Transportation issues and a scarcity of available resources are additional factors to be considered when rural schools undertake efforts to increase parent involvement. Some innovative programs have parents riding with students on the school bus. While the children are in class, parents participate in workshops and discussion groups or perform volunteer duties in the school. When a lack of health care, adequate food, or basic education prevent parents from providing essentials for their children's success in school, we think it is appropriate for rural schools to work with local agencies to make these services available and accessible to families.

As we have noted, well attended parent participation projects are held at times and places convenient to the parents. Thus, in rural settings, local seasonal issues—harvest, planting, hunting season—need to be considered when setting times for activities.

Introduction to Site Profiles

NCREL's Rural Education Program has assembled a set of site profiles of notable parent involvement programs. These are not offered as examples to copy but as models to inspire. By no means is this an exhaustive list of good programs. Rather, these programs represent a range of efforts by rural schools and districts to increase the level of parent involvement.

Please read these profiles with an eye toward seeing how different rural communities have solved their need to involve parents in the workings of the school and the education of their children. Some of these solutions may fit your community; others will not. Some may trigger a thought which results in a simple modification that works well at your school. For each program profiled, we have listed contact people who are eager to share their story and listen to yours. The Rural Education staff at NCREL also would like to hear how you have applied this information in your local effort to bolster parent involvement. Please contact us.

Parent Involvement Project
Rural Schools
NCREL
1900 Spring Road, Suite 300
Oak Brook, iL 60521
(800) 356-2735

Interesting Parent Involvement Programs to Explore

Name: **The Manhattan/Ogden Even Start Program**
Ogden, Kansas

Forms of Parent Involvement Present:

- Fulfilling basic parent responsibilities
- Working with their children on home-based learning activities
- Learning new skills
- Volunteering time and providing assistance at the school

Description of Community:

Ogden, Kansas is a community of 2,200 near a large military base, Fort Riley. This isolated town has no public transportation, no library, and no public health center. The program is housed in the Ogden Elementary School.

Program Description:

Like other Even Start programs, Ogden's project stresses the important role parents play as their children's first teachers. Adult literacy skills are emphasized so that parents can help their children achieve their full potential as learners. The program strives to raise the community's literacy awareness level.

Program Elements:

- Community participants are issued library cards to use the school library; library has extended hours for community use
- Parent Resource Room at the school
- Parent newsletter
- Community-wide parent activities
- Family reading workshops
- Parent volunteers in the school library
- Building principal Doyle Barnes actively supports the program

Special Rural Issues Taken Into Account:

The Even Start program at Ogden Elementary School is one rural community's response to the scarcity of services in the town. The school library has become the town's library and parents view the school as a place where they as well as their children can learn new skills. Providing child care for parent volunteers met a parent need as well as created new relationships between school staff and community residents. In the more than four years that Ogden has had an Even Start program, the school's role in the community has become more pivotal.

Contact Persons:

Kay Weigel, Library Media Specialist
or
Barbara Tierney, Even Start Director
Ogden Elementary School
Box L
210 South Elm Street
Ogden, KS 66517
(913) 587-2080

Some Questions to Consider When Examining This Program:

How did this program begin? Who got it going?

How was this program able to work with area colleges to enhance services?

While this program targets parents of preschool children, how could it be modified to target the parents of elementary school children?

Which staff qualities were called upon to encourage parents to participate?

Does your community qualify for Even Start program funds? If not, what are some other resources you might use to establish such a program?

Name: **Family Math**
St. Rose, Illinois

Forms of Parent Involvement Present:

- Fulfilling basic parent responsibilities
- Working with their children on learning activities
- Learning new skills

Description of Community:

St. Rose, Illinois, is a community of 1,000 in southwestern Illinois, approximately 40 miles from St. Louis, Missouri. Many of its residents work in agriculture, but an increasing number work in the city or at the local air force base. Resident turnover is very low.

Program Description:

Like other Family Math programs, St. Rose's stresses parents and children learning mathematics together. Their program provides opportunities for families to come together for an evening at the school and develop problem-solving skills and gain a greater understanding of mathematics with hands-on materials. Teachers see Family Math as a way to augment their classroom program and assist students (and parents) who have a high level of math anxiety. A typical Family Math night begins with different math-related activities that parents and students perform together. These activities include predictions, estimations, making venn diagrams, or three dimensional puzzles. For the formal part of the program, a speaker from the community speaks to participants about math usage and its relevance to their lives. The speaker might be a farmer, carpenter, engineer, local businessman, etc. Break out sessions take place following the speaker. In these sessions, teams of teachers present hands-on activities to small groups of parents and their children. Several classrooms of teams are set up and groups move from room to room. Materials used with each group are usually for the parents and children to continue at home. Each family is charged $1 to offset the cost of materials.

Parents who have participated in the program report that they enjoy the events and find the hands-on activities to be fun and motivating. Parents also report that they benefit from seeing their child as a student and that the experience gives them a better understanding of school and teacher expectations.

Program Elements:

- Parents learn about the school mathematics program and are able to assist with and support learning at home.
- Parents are welcomed in the school and valued as partners.

Special Rural Issues Taken Into Account:

The Family Math program at St. Rose Elementary School provides a first step in the creation of a network of communication between the school and family for the benefit of the student, parents, and school. As it grows, this network allows the school to convey learning goals and expectations to the family, and a chance to become more aware of the student's family situation. It allows the parents to express their goals for the student as well as any concerns about the school's programs. The result is better coordination and cooperation for learning and encouragement between home and school.

Contact Person:

Linda Schoette, Teacher
St. Rose Elementary School
District #14-15 - 18004 St. Rose Road
St. Rose, IL 62230
(618) 526-7484

Some Questions to Consider When Examining This Program:

How did this program begin? Who got it going?

What kinds of teacher training are a prerequisite to offering a Family Math program in the school?

How can Family Math be incorporated into a larger parent involvement initiative?

How were parents encouraged to participate?

Name: **MegaSkills**
The Home and School Institute
MegaSkills, Education Center
Washington, D.C.

Forms of Parent Involvement Present:

- Working with their children on learning activities
- Learning new skills
- Volunteering time and providing other assistance at the school

Description of Community:

Mt. Morris, Michigan , is a small community in the northern section of the "Greater Flint" area. The population is 70 percent white, 27 percent Native American, and 3 percent other. It is a predominately blue-collar community with a high percentage of single parents and low-income families. Most community residents graduated from high school.

Program Description:

MegaSkills sees parents as a child's first teachers. They shape the values, attitudes, and behaviors that determine achievement in school and beyond. There are 10 basic skills that the program incorporates into easy, tested ways a parent can use at home to support the academic skills needed in school and beyond. Workshops are presented to parents by trained and certified MegaSkills leaders throughout the community. The program builds upon parents strengths and encourages them to help bridge educational and cultural barriers within the group.

Community wide workshops do not have to be held at a school. Hand-outs of tested recipes or educational activities require little or no expense to do at home. Publications are available to parents either to purchase or to borrow from presenters (the original MegaSkills book by Dr. Dorothy Rich has a second revised edition, and there are tapes, MegaSkills Messages publications, and a series of lessons that can be used in the classroom by a trained teacher).

Activities that can be generated are original to the facilitator presenting the workshops. For example, one program conducts a "MegaSkills Cafe" after school and has a parent graduate celebration at the completion of the workshops. Door prizes and attendance incentives encourage parents to keep coming back. JoAnne Christensen conducts workshops in Mt. Morris, Michigan, that provide role- playing opportunities for parents and sends home specific activities for parents to use with their children. Her district is in the process of finding funds to develop one of their elementary school buildings into a MegaSkills school. Another program coordinates workshops with pizza parties that can include parents and children. Children demonstrate MegaSkills recipes and activities and give immediate feedback to parents.

Program Elements:

- Parents learn skills to support learning.
- Family's culture is incorporated into the curriculum.

Special Rural Issues Taken Into Account:

The MegaSkills program can easily be offered in a rural community. Training as a MegaSkills leader is readily available. The program can be offered in a variety of settings and allows participating parents to select those skills they feel are most needed. The program encourages sponsorship from local institutions, i.e., churches, business, and civic organizations.

Contact Person:

JoAnne Christensen, Teacher and MegaSkills Certified Trainer
Mt. Morris Consolidated Schools
Central Elementary School - Title I Parent Coordinator
1000 Mt. Morris St.
Mt. Morris, MI 48450
(810) 687-8057 - Work
(810) 733-6036 - Home

Some Questions to Consider When Examining This Program:

What does the MegaSkills training include and how are trainers certified?

Are there certified trainers within a reasonable traveling distance?
(The Home and School Institute Inc. can supply this information.)

The Home and School Institute, Inc.
MegaSkills Education Center
1201 16th St. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
(202) 466-3633

How is workshop attendance encouraged, especially when there are at least four separate workshops?

Are there government funds that can be used to help offset the cost of training and workshop expenses? Example: Title 1 money.

How can the components of this program be geared up or down depending on the age of the children being addressed?

Name: **Parents Sharing Books**
Based in the Family Literacy Center
at Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana

Forms of Parent Involvement Present:

- Working with their children on learning activities
- Learning new skills

Description of Community:

Owen County has an approximate population of 18,000, ranking it among the top 10 fastest growing counties in Indiana. Nearly 50 percent of the county residents work outside the county. According to the 1990 Federal Census records, 30 percent of the households fall below the national poverty level. 24 percent of the students participate in the "free and reduced lunch" program. The majority of the students at Owen Valley Middle School live in rural homes. Their school buses log 2,200 miles each day.

Program Description:

This program can be used in any community desiring to provide parents with a way to become involved in their child's education through literacy. Seminars are offered through the Family Literacy Center and can be scheduled in school districts that desire demonstrations of strategies and activities that are a part of Parents Sharing Books.

Parents learn book sharing strategies and motivation techniques. The stages of reading development are explained to parents and a bibliography is provided as a list of materials to assist their children in becoming readers. Parents are trained as tutors to encourage and assist their children. They meet with other parents and receive support as they try out new ways of interacting with their children.

The complete Parents Sharing Books program includes a manual, trade books, transparencies, video, and bookmarks—a total package for $130. These materials are used in a series of workshops presented to demonstrate ways parents can use conversation as a tool with children to share thoughts and feelings, practice methods of reading aloud, offer guidelines for selecting books, and merge art, drama, and writing to help identify

mutual interests. Small groups meet over a period of several months, preferably at least six times, so that families can gradually make needed changes at home and receive support. Workshops can be limited to parents only or include parents and their children.

Program Elements:

- Parents learn skills to support learning.

Special Rural Issues Taken Into Account:

Parents can gather wherever they feel most comfortable—anywhere in the community. Inexpensive sources of books are suggested. Parent leaders can be trained to conduct workshops. Title 1 money can be used to implement this program. There are many additional resource books for parents to read and they are relatively inexpensive.

Contact Persons:

Ellie Macfarlane, Associate Director
Family Literacy Center
Indiana University
2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150
Bloomington, IN 47408-2698

Ms. Darla Staley
Owen Valley Middle School
R. R. 4, Box 12
Spencer, IN 47460
(812) 829-2249 - School
(317) 795-6779 - Home

Some Questions to Consider When Examining This Program:

How available is the Parents Sharing Books leadership training?

How can poor communities find funding for this program?

How has this program affected literacy, test scores, grades, etc.?

Name: **Minnesota Early Childhood Family Education**
St. Paul, Minnesota

Forms of Parent Involvement Present:

- Working with their children—emphasis on communication skills, problem solving, and expression of feelings
- Being a learner—concentration on child development
- Volunteering time and providing assistance at the school

Description of Community:

Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) is a program for all Minnesota families that have children between the ages of birth and kindergarten. Local communities can apply for funding to set up a program which meets the needs of the local community. One rural community that has established an effective early childhood education program is Monticello, a small town located 50 miles west of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The town's biggest employers are Northern States Power Nuclear Plant, located in Monticello, and the school district. It is also home for many long distance commuters to the Twin Cities.

Program Description:

Early Childhood Family Education programs are designed to meet the needs of families in all communities and can be tailored to the needs of one community. It is the goal of this program to serve a representative cross-section of families with young children. Program activities can be conducted in shopping centers, apartment buildings, churches, homeless shelters, and other community sites.

It stresses that families provide children's first learning environments, and that parents are their first and perhaps most important teachers. This program works at strengthening families and supporting the parents' ability to provide the most desired environment for a child's healthy growth and development.

Program Elements:

- Formerly adopted policies. Minnesota ECFE is a statewide program established by the legislature.
- A partnership approach. Parents play an active role in defining the program.
- Parents are welcomed into the school and valued as partners.
- A parent involvement coordinator. Paid staff administer the program.

Special Rural Issues Taken Into Account:

This is a program that can have a site for meetings anywhere in the community. Participation by families is voluntary and services are offered free or for a nominal fee. Fees are waved for families unable to pay. A major component is that there is universal access to all families. This avoids the potential segregation, stigma, and labeling associated with other targeted programs. All parents can benefit from support and information, especially during a child's early years. Expensive equipment and supplies are not needed; the more "homespun" approach is preferred.

Contact Persons:

Lois Engstrom, Community and Family Education Team Leader
State of Minnesota - Department of Education
Capitol Square Building - 550 Cedar Street
St. Paul, MN 55101
(612) 296-8414

Pam Lindberg, Early Childhood Family Education Coordinator
Monticello Early Childhood Family Education
Box 897 - 1010 West Broadway
Monticello, MN 55362
(612) 295-2925

Some Questions to Consider When Examining This Program:

Each program has an advisory council to help match services to community needs. How is this council chosen and what specifically does it do?

Since this program was funded by the Minnesota legislature and coordinated by the Minnesota Council on Quality Education, is there comparable funding available in other states and support as well?

What benefits are there from programs like this during later school years?

Once the family's children are out of the birth to kindergarten range, are there follow-up programs recommended or available to families to continue their support and commitment to their children?

What are the requirements for a licensed teacher to work with children and parents in the Early Childhood Family Education Program?

Endnotes

[1] Coleman, J. S. (1991). *Parental involvement in education,* U.S. Department of Education, p. 6.

[2] U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Earned degrees conferred: Projections of educational statistics to 2004.*

[3] Epstein, J. L. (1986). *Toward an integration theory of school and family connections* (Report No. 3). Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, pp. 20-24.

[4] Comer, J. P. (1989). Parent Participation in Schools: The School Development Program as a model, *Family Resource Coalition Report,* No. 2.

[5] Coleman, op. cit. p. 7.

[6] There is much discussion about which term, "parent involvement" or "family involvement," is best to use. We address this issue in the **Forward.**

[7] Goals 2000 legislation.

[8] Epstein, J. L. (1984). *Effects of parent involvement on change in student achievement in reading and math.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association.

[9] Wilkinson, D. (1990). From cookies to collaboration: Parents' role in restructuring, *Policy Briefs,* Number 9, quoted in Ryan, Thomas E. (1992, Fall). Schooling without parents is like raking leaves in a high wind. *Prevention Forum.*

[10] Chrispeels, J. A. (1987). The family as an educational resource. *Community Education Journal,* pp. 10-17.

[11] Epstein, J. (1992). School and Family Partnerships. In M. Alkin (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of educational research* (6th Ed.) New York: MacMillan.

[12] Comer, J. P. (1989). Parent Participation in Schools: The School Development Program as a model, *Family Resource Coalition Report,* No. 2.

[13] Henderson, A. T., & Berla, N. (1994). *A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement.* National Committee for Citizens in Education.

Endnotes (continued)

[14] Epstein, J. (1983). *Effects on parents of teacher practices in parent involvement,* Center for Social Organization of Schools, Baltimore, MD., John Hopkins University.

[15] Henderson, op. cit.

[16] Chavkin, N. F., & Williams, D. L. (1988). Critical issues in teacher training for parent involvement. *Educational Horizon.*

[17] Mansbach, S. C. (1993). We must put family literacy on the national agenda. *Reading Today,* 37.

[18] Epstein, J. (1987). Toward a theory of family school connections: Teacher practices and parent involvement. K. Kurrelmann, F. Kaufmann, & F. Lasel (Eds.). *Social Intervention, Potential and Constraint.* New York, DeGruyler.

[19] Eastman, G. (1988, January). *Family involvement in education.* A paper prepared for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

[20] Brandt, R. (1989). On parents and schools: A conversation with Joyce Epstein. *Educational Leadership,* 47, 24-27.

[21] Epstein, J. (1984). School policy and parent involvement — research results. *Educational Horizons, 62.*

[22] Greenberg, P. (1989). Parents as partners in young children's development and education: A new American fad? Why does it matter?, *Young Children.*

[23] Hamilton-Lee, M. (1988). Home-school partnerships: The School Development Model, quoted in Lynn Balster Liontos Involving the Families of At-Risk Youth in the Educational Process, *Trends and issues: A series of papers highlighting recent developments in research and practice in educational management,* ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, OR. 1991.

[24] Sevener, D. (1990). Parent and teachers: Conavigators for successful schooling, *Synthesis,* 1(2), 1-3.

[25] Ehly, S., & Dustin, D. (1994). Surviving parent-teacher involvement. *Education Week,* pp 32-36.

Endnotes (continued)

[26] Olson, L. (1990) Parents as partners. *Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., 9(28),* 17-24.

[27] Lynn, L. (1994, Winter). Building Parent Involvement, *Brief to Principals,* Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, (8).

[28] Chrispeels, J. (1992, September). *Using an Effective Schools Framework to build home-school partnerships for student success.* San Diego County Office of Education.

[29] Comer, op. cit. p. 5.

[30] Williams D. L., & Chavkin, N. F. (1989). Essential elements of strong parent involvement programs. *Educational Leadership,* 18-20.

[31] Swick, K. J. (1991). Teacher-parent partnerships to enhance school success in early childhood education. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

[32] Chrispeels, op. cit. p. 33.

[33] Eastman, G. (1988, January). Family involvement in education. A paper prepared for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

[34] Chrispeels, op. cit.

[35] Brandt, R. (1989). On parents and schools: A conversation with Joyce Epstein. *Educational Leadership,* 47, 24-27.

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory
1900 Spring Road, Suite 300
Oak Brook, IL 60521-1480
(708) 571-4700
Fax (708) 571-4716

BEST COPY AVAILABLE